Review section

Shocking Purple

THIS review should have been written in the white heat of anger after seeing Deep Purple play at the Empire Pool, Wembley, on Friday night. But now several hours have elapsed, it's Monday morning and it doesn't seem to matter any more.

We learn the various reasons for the sad and dismal performance by the band: that they were suffering from jet lag, that Tommy Bolin was reputedly carried on stage to play, that the following night they redeemed themselves.

But the fact remains that the whole atmosphere surrounding the Pool was so depressing that it aroused in me feelings of pity for the audience, pity for the musicians and pity for the stewards, who not only had to endure the caturwauling din that Purple produced in the name of rock music, but attempt to control and pacify the anguish and torment the music seemed to induce in the young fans.

Quite apart from the spectacle of once-respected musicians degrading themselves, the spectacle of unhappy youth seeking some escape from the seeming vacuity of their lives was worrying and depressing.

The Empire Pool, an echoing, concrete bear-baiting pit, is eminently unsuitable for musical events. But this was hardly a musical event: just a band out to prove its position on the prestige scale and an occasion to sell hot dogs and tee-shirts and all the tatty paraphernalia of the cheap circus this end of rock has become.

That some of the audience enjoyed themselves was undeniable. There were cheers, but there were also perceptive yells of "rubbish" during Tommy Bolin's main guitar feature. His playing was deeply disappointing, combining all the worst excesses of the fraudulent lead guitarist satirised by rock's own sternest critics, Alberto Y Lost Trios Paranoias.

But there was no need for satire with this kind of cheap gimmickry. Unaccompanied, Bolin paused for minutes on end to egg the baying mob to further yelling, then savaged his guitar strings in a parody of the great, flamboyant guitarists who once vitalised rock.

I was sorry to see that great musician and gentleman, Jon Lord, involved in this mess, and his playing when audible through the PA, revealed flashes of his old love for jazz.

The only man who emerged with credit was Ian Paice, whose immaculate, ever-enthusiastic drumming, even in the most uncompromising circumstances, held the band together.

David Coverdale's screaming vocals were delivered with some heat, but didn't he yearn to sing something of quality and real soul, and not all these cheap wine and downers anthems for a zombie?

Around the hall, while the band were winning their final encore by sheer brute force, I watched attendants struggle to retain a demented youth, while another lay slumped on the concrete floor.

Music should not dispense despair, it should bring hope and joy. There is enough stress in society generated by God knows how many forces, without rock music feeding the process, and peddling aural narcotics. — CHRIS WELCH

BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH

THE Brotherhood Of Breath's concert at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall last Wednesday was not, by their own high standards, one of their most successful gigs. But then they had much to contend with — new material, in the shape of Chris McGregor's suite "Our God Is A Consuming Fire," a rather sparse audience, the stiff formality of South Bank architecture and a drummer who didn't show until after the interval.

Louis Moholo's wife had been taken ill, so the Brotherhood's driving force couldn't make the first half of the programme.

Fortunately, Anthony Braxton's drummer Barry Altschul was in town and agreed to sit in, thus saving the band some embarrassment. However, Altschul, who has specialised in more cerebal forms of jazz (as with Paul Bley, Circle etc), seemed reluctant to apply the necessary muscle to get the Brotherhood off the ground and the first half was consequently uneven in quality.

Part two was another matter altogether, however, as the new, improved Brotherhood took the stage — Chris McGregor (piano), Harry Miller and Johnny Dyani (basses), Moholo (drums), Dudu Pukwana (alto sax), Elton Dean (alto, saxello), Mike Osborne (alto, clarinet), Evan Parker (tenor), Joachim van der Grant (baritone, flute), Mark Charig (cornet, tenor horn) and Radu Malfatti (trombone).

Any disappointment felt in the first half was more than compensated for the moment Moholo got behind the drums.

Resisting the temptation to rock out in traditional kwela fashion until the final moments, the Brotherhood stretched out in a long series of interrelated themes, solos and duets. I always enjoy hearing Evan Parker play melodically, and his solo, working from reserved beginnings steadily out into the unknown where he was eventually joined by Mike Osborne, was remarkable. There's something strangely reassuring about free music played on top of conventional rhythms.

The highlight of the whole show, however, was a stunning bass duet between Harry Miller and Johnny Dyani, punctuated by snare explosions from the mighty Moholo.

South Bank jobsworths ruled out the possibility of an encore by turning up the houselights while the band were still playing, which was a drag. I could have listened at least a couple of hours longer. Would that they had hit that groove earlier. — STEVE LAKE

CAROLE KING

NEW YORK: Carole King's decision to go out on the road this year was a surprising one. At 35 years of age, Ms King seems happily ensconced in the role of a mother and, considering the enormous fortune she has amassed through sales of "Tapestry" (something around 13,000,000 at the last count), there seems little need for the effort required in undertaking a strenuous tour.

But she has, and the world is certainly better for it. Last weekend she played three concerts at the Beacon Theatre here in New York, and Saturday's show was as enjoyable a musical evening I've spent so far this year. On Sunday, apparently, she was joined on stage by Bruce Springsteen, but I've no complaints. On her own she was just fine.

Ms King was on stage for the entire concert, opening solo at a grand piano placed centre stage, and gradually adding to her back-up unit until the full complement was achieved. The band stayed for the entire second half, altering their instrumentation for an oldies segment, but offering a quite superb backdrop to the King song catalogue. Not surprising really — the rhythm section comprised Russ Kunkel (drums) and Leland Sklar (bass), two of the best-known California session players around.

And on guitar Waddy Wachtel often threatened to take the limelight away from Ms King herself, a scheme she both encouraged and enjoyed.

The second half of the performance, when Ms King changed from a demure long dress into denims and floppy top, was the stronger.

For the oldies segment — dedicated to "the first man who ever gave me a chance, who is in the audience tonight" (presumably Don Kirshner) — she chose "Will You Love Me Tomorrow", "Up On The Roof" and "Locomotion."

"It's Too Late" opened the second half, while "You Gotta Friend" closed the show, neatly bracketing her two biggest hits, as a performer, within the context of the concert. The only uncomfortable moments occurred when she sat cross-legged on the stage in a vain attempt at some kind of rap session between the audience and herself. Her inability to communicate on a level beyond music was mildly embarrassing but fortunately it was over quickly. — CHRIS CHARLESWORTH

BOTHY BAND

IT'S gonna be hard to get through this review without sounding clichéd or repetitively gushing. All sense of reasoned objectivity is abandoned in the memory of this marvellous gig.

It took place at London's Imperial College last Thursday, and as odious as it is to talk of anyone in terms of being a sensation or "the next big thing," the Bothy Band that night justified every wild, extravagant prediction made on their behalf. The Chieftains have already achieved miracles with Irish traditional music, and the Bothy Band, who adopt a far gutsier, more rhythmic approach, are surely bound to emulate their success.

As it was, they arrived in London towards the end of a gruelling schedule but played with an adventure and vigour unrivalled by anybody playing folk music. They are the ultimate proof of Robin Morton's contention that it's necessary to be an electric band to create impact and excitement. I've never heard anyone produce the electrifying exhilaration of the Bothy Band in full flight.

Even in the comparatively short time since their last (and only previous) visit to Britain, they have tightened up considerably, and their whole set is strengthened by the fact that they cover a wide range. When Triona Ni Dhomhnaill sings "Pretty Peg" it changes the whole mood of the set, while her clavinet adds a different tone to the rhythms. They can also play with rare mellow beauty — the blend of Matt Molloy's flute playing and Tommy Peoples' fiddle is at times stunning.

But it's Uilleann piper Paddy Keenan who inevitably attracts the attention. Keenan's free, uninhibited style is the centrepiece of the Bothy Band's appeal — at one point he earned a prolonged standing ovation with one breathtaking solo. Tommy Peoples adopts a similarly rugged style of playing with the fiddle, and these two repeatedly produce the wizardry that make this band like no other. The weighty rhythm section, the Scottish mouth music, and the straight vocal numbers all contribute richly to the varied yet distinctive pattern.

If you missed them this time round, there should be other opportunities. Definitely in the "not to be missed" category. — COLIN IRWIN.

GRASS ROOTS

THE Grass Roots Jazz Club, which used to flourish adventurously down in Stockwell three years ago, made a welcome return last week disguised as London's 100 Club, Oxford Street — henceforth the scene for hearty blowing every Monday.

And, to make the inauguration a suitably memorable event, the organisers booked the trios of Stan Tracey and Keith Tippett (easily my two favourite European pianists) to work with a whole series of itinerant soloists—Art Themen, Mike Osborne and Brian Smith (reeds), Harry Beckett (trumpet) and Malcolm Griffiths (trombone).

From 8 o'clock to midnight, the pace rarely let up, the Tracey trio, with Dave Green (bass) and Bryan Spring (drums) immediately digging in, Smith and Griffiths in hot pursuit. Spring, particularly, was astounding, playing with such force and vigour that his kit slowly cruised to the front of the 100 Club stage, while his sticks blurred off the snare.

But if solo strength was the forte of Tracey's first set, the Tippett trio, featuring Johnny Dyani (bass) and Louis Moholo (drums) was convincing and impressive as a coherent, highly exciting unit that ought to be recorded real soon. It's rare, very rare, to hear real group character emerge in a new band, but Tippett/Dyani/Moholo have almost an excess of it — Keith whipping up the keyboard in virtuoso lightning bursts or rattling top and bottom c's to create a pedal for some outside arco playing by Dyani, playing with typical wildcat grace.

In fact the trio played so effectively together that the entrance of Mike Osborne and Harry Beckett, great players though they are, was anticlimactic and brought the music into slightly more predictable territory.

Not a tragedy, however, and Beckett, who spent the night commuting between the 100 Club and a gig with Kathy Stobart at Ronnie's, threw off more than a few white hot frenetic solos — maybe a reaction against the comparative safeness of Stobart's bag?

Anyway, Tracey returned, more dynamic, more percussive than ever, with Art Themen crafting majestic solos on tenor and soprano, and by the end of the evening everybody had played with almost everybody else, and everybody had had a good time.

And, it might have been imagination, but the 100 Club piano seemed to sag, mid keyboard.— STEVE LAKE

CAT STEVENS

NEW YORK: Despite the waning quality of his records, Cat Stevens continues to command a large following in America. Last week he played a couple of shows at the Madison Square Garden, selling out both, although the seats behind the stage were left vacant since his current presentation — the Magikat show — involves a tent-like backdrop that obscures vision from the rear.

It was an attractive setting, but poor sound quality marred the second performance, which I caught, and frequently obscured Stevens' lyrics, reducing his back-up unit to a muggy, muffled blur that echoed painfully around this huge arena. Few acts are able to master the Garden's sound problem and Stevens, sadly, is not amongst them.

Stevens was on stage for the entire programme, apart from a stint by a magic trio at the outset — when they conjured up the star of the show from a Houdini-like chamber — and immediately before and after the twenty minute interval. Their presence created light relief and heightened the effect of Stevens' show considerably.

In his time, Stevens has made a couple of classic albums — "Teaser And The Firecat" and "Tea For The Tillerman" — and it was the songs from these that once again proved his strongpoint, not just musically, but also audience-wise.

Newer material didn't fare so well, although "Banapple Gas," accompanied by a film, came over as commercially viable while the instrumental "Whistlestar" was sensibly utilised as the soundtrack to some more magic tricks.

Stevens himself seems to realise where his strength lies and concentrates on the older material, picking very few tracks from his last four albums for live interpretation.

"Oh Very Young," with its intricate little vocal interplay between lead and female backup, for example, was lost amidst the muggy PA, and Stevens' keyboard work suffered a similar fate more often than not. His piano chords often droned like ships' foghorns in the night.

Not even the superbly efficient back-up unit could remedy this, though Alun Davis' acoustic picking came over better than most. It would be churlish of me not to point out that his audience loved every minute of it. — CHRIS CHARLESWORTH

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